

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH LIEUTENANT COLONEL ROBERT MORSCHAUSER, BATTALION COMMANDER, 2ND BATTALION, 15TH FIELD ARTILLERY REGIMENT, 2ND BRIGADE, 10TH MOUNTAIN DIVISION, VIA TELECONFERENCE FROM IRAQ TOPIC: OPERATIONS FROM MAHMUDIYAH TIME: 10:00 A.M. EDT DATE: WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 8, 2007

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LT. COL. MORSCHAUSER: This is Colonel Morschauser.

CHARLES "JACK" HOLT (chief, New Media Operations, OASD PA): Colonel Morschauser, Jack Holt here with OSD and the bloggers roundtable, and welcome to bloggers roundtable this morning, sir. Appreciate you spending the time with us, Lieutenant Colonel Robert D. Morschauser, the battalion commander, 2nd Battalion, 15th Field Artillery Regiment, 2nd Brigade, 10th Mountain Division. He's got a military training team with the Iraqi army.

And welcome aboard, sir. Thank you for joining us this morning. Do you have an opening statement for us? LT. COL. MORSCHAUSER: Okay, sir. Our Battalion Task Force 215 FA operates in what we commonly refer to as south Baghdad. We are located 17 miles south of Baghdad proper, and I liken our area to -- of operations to a suburb of Baghdad. Eighty percent of it being agriculture, the land here is dotted with many small villages and lined with irrigation canals fed by the Euphrates River.

There are a few population centers in our area, most notably Mahmudiyah, a city of about 150,000 people. It is a very important economic, social and political center, and the seat of government for the qadha, or county.

Highway 8, a very important corridor connecting Baghdad to the religious cities of Karbala and An Najaf in the south, runs through Mahmudiyah north to south and splits our sector in half.

Lutifiyah, the next-largest population center in our area, which is why this battalion occupies two separate forward operating bases, with one of my units operating out of Lutifiyah and the rest of my battalion operating here, out of Mahmudiyah -- altogether this task force is responsible for almost 370 square kilometers of land and a population center of 200,000 Iraqi local nationals.

Our task force's role, while partnered with the nearly 5,000-man 4th Brigade, 6th Iraqi Army Division, sometimes referred to as the Baghdad Eagle Brigade, is to provide security and civil-military assistance to our area. Our unit is heavily focused on the extremely important task of supporting, advising and providing advanced training to our Iraqi army partners, so that they can

operate autonomously in the near future. Our task force missions along with the Iraqi army include security patrols, cordon-and-searches for weapons and cache - and explosives, intelligence-based raids and ambushes directed at insurgent forces, and civil-military operations, which include planning and coordinating essential services projects with local Iraqi governments, to include but not limited to electricity, water, medical support, education, et cetera.

Empowered by task force initiatives and the professionalism of our soldiers, our senior noncommissioned officers have conducted advanced Iraqi infantry training on a day-to-day basis, to include our newly created Iraqi commando course, which is a combination of the U.S. Army Air Assault and Ranger schools, and the Iraqi Warrior Leaders course, which certifies Iraqi army noncommissioned officers on leadership tasks required outside the wire on mounted and dismounted patrols and air assaults.

We have currently graduated and certified 29 Iraqi army commandos and 112 noncommissioned officers. In total we have sent 370 personnel through our own U.S.-led specialty schools, and we have sent a grand total of 610 personnel through Iraqi specialty training. Overall, our Iraqi counterparts continue to improve daily and gain the confidence to secure the area's population and conduct autonomous operations against anti-Iraqi forces here in south Baghdad.

Just to briefly cover our unit's organization and background, we are an artillery battalion transformed and serving as a motorized rifle battalion. The task force is compiled of mainly artillery soldiers, and our line batteries have been supplemented with both infantry and cavalry troops. This is the second time our unit has deployed to Iraq as a motorized rifle battalion, and all of our soldiers are well-trained and accustomed to dismounted and mounted patrols, raids, ambushes and high-level combined and joint operations, including helicopter air assaults on a weekly basis.

Additionally, we have one platoon participating in the brigade's counter-battery mission, the only true artillery mission this task force conducts, which is providing around-the-clock, 105 millimeter fires against insurgent mortar and rocket locations and in support of our own offensive operations. Our "hot" platoon, as we refer to them, has fired over 2,200 rounds in sector since our assumption of authority back in September. Through these efforts, we have been able to diminish indirect fires -- insurgent indirect fires in the Mahmudiyah area by 75 percent.

To date our task force, in conjunction with the Baghdad Eagle Brigade, has conducted over 847 joint patrols, 29 air assaults, and a combined total of over 260 brigade, company and platoon-level operations, resulting in over 2,950 suspected insurgents detained. Additionally, since September we have located 271 IEDs, responded to 359 small-arms fires incidents and 417 enemy indirect fire incidents and have located 72 weapons caches.

I believe we've cracked the code when it comes to working with the Iraqi army. Our brigade has placed our entire battalion towards this mission rather than a traditional 11-man MiTT team, which have positive effect in other sectors but just doesn't bring the manpower assets that an entire task force has at its disposal.

When comparing our partnership role to an adviser role, a few advantages mainly come to mind. Unlike Iraqi MiTT teams or advisers or, I should say, U.S. MiTT teams or advisers, our partnership grants us the ability

to build relationships at every level, not just with the Iraqi command and staff but also down to the platoon and squad leaders and even Iraqi squad members themselves. Our partnership allows us to work all lines of operation while we are tactically employed. These lines of operations include central services, governance and economic development, in addition to the kinetic operation and the Iraqi security force development. Covering all lines of operations is not just -- is just not feasible for an 11-man advisory team, where it is something we can all act as a task force.

Gentlemen, ladies, that covers my opening statement. I'm prepared to answer your questions.

MR. HOLT: Thank you very much, Colonel.

Andrew Lubin, why don't you get us started again?

Q Colonel, Andrew Lubin -- good to talk to you again, sir.

COL. MORSCHAUSER: Thanks, Andy, hope you're doing well.

Q Oh, good, thanks.

And also, Captain Edge, how you doing over there?

COL. MORSCHAUSER: Captain Edge is sitting down in the state he's usually in.

Q Okay, no surprise, we'll leave him out of it, then. (Laughs.)

Q Okay, hey, with -- Colonel, with the effects of the surge over in the -- MNF-I Central's ops over in Eastern Baghdad, what do you see in the way of JAM moving south into your AO? You run into more problems with this in the past two months?

COL. MORSCHAUSER: Okay, what I think you just asked me -- what are the effects of the surge in our area of operations? You broke up a little bit. Did you say something about Jaish al-Mahdi also?

Q Yeah, well, with what we're hearing from MNF-I Central is that they're pushing -- you know, they had the big op for example, say, in Sadr city. And when I was with you, you were telling me how you have JAM moving south. Well, with MNF-I Central really pushing into Eastern Baghdad, are the whack-a-mole people popping up in your area, compared to staying in Eastern Baghdad?

COL. MORSCHAUSER: We have seen some of that, Andy. We have seen a push of Jaish al-Mahdi into the Mahmudiyah area -- not as much as I thought it was going to be, but there has been some over the past few months.

I will tell you that we have had some successful operations against Jaish al-Mahdi. We are working with Jaish al-Mahdi with the reconcilables, guys that we think we could pull back into supporting the government of Iraq.

We're working with them. I think we're having some success there.

Now, the rogue elements, some people call them Special JAM, we are still targeting as they -- (audio break) -- around the Mahmudiyah as they are

causing around greater Baghdad in the south, and we've had some success. As a matter of fact, in the last 10 days in Mahmudiyah we've been able to pick up a few of our high-value targets in regards to Jaish al-Mahdi or -- (audio break) -- issues in general. But again, we are working to also bring these reconcilables back into the fold with the government of Iraq. It's not all kinetic.

Q Well, the guys who you referred to as rogue elements, Special JAM, are they criminals, are they religious wackos, or what makes them different than normal JAM?

LT. COL. MORSCHAUSER: I tell you, it's complicated. I would say some are definitely philosophically aligned with the religious principles there -- (audio break) -- and they're out for money and power. And we see both types -- when they're targeting us, targeting Iraqi security forces, and when they're targeting Iraqi civilians, it really doesn't matter. But we do see both -- (audio break) -- there.

Q Great. Thank you. Appreciate the time.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Bruce, Bruce McQuain.

Q Hey, Colonel, Bruce McQuain, QandO. You know, building an army, obviously, is not an easy job, and you guys are right in the middle of that. The key to that of course is the NCO Corps. Can you give me a little sense of what you guys are doing in NCO development and where you see that particular piece in your training right now?

LT. COL. MORSCHAUSER: Bruce, yeah great question because it's very important. We identified right off the -- out of the get-go when we knew we were coming to this sector and going to be working with the 4th Brigade -- (audio break) -- Army Division that we had to develop the Iraqi NCO Corps. The Iraqi NCO Corps used to be a part of Saddam's time. It used to be a pretty viable corps, and it deteriorated through Saddam's reign, and we are trying to build that back up. Back a couple of months, three or four months prior to deploying, we developed our key tasks for the deployment, and one of them was to develop the NCO Corps.

And what we're doing, we are running monthly a -- what we call the Warrior Leaders Course based on the Warrior Leaders Course that we have in the U.S. Army for junior non-commissioned officers or soldiers ready to be non-commissioned officers. And we've taken that instruction from the American Army -- we tweaked it some to fit the Iraq army, and we run it over about a four-week period with -- and then we'll take a week off, and we'll run that course and we'll get to about 30 graduates every course.

We've gotten a lot of positive feedback from the Iraqi army.

Now, when we first started it, we were running into some roadblocks up at Iraqi Ground Forces Command. The minister of Defense did not want to recognize and promote these guys and pay them as sergeants. Since then, with getting some of these generals down from minister of Defense, Iraqi Ground Forces Command, et cetera, they see how well the course is functioning, or the output of the course, what we're producing, and now once these guys graduate, they are promoted to a non-commissioned officer, to a sergeant, and they're being paid as sergeants, so it's a good thing.

The other thing they're doing that wasn't happening before we got here is the sergeants that were here weren't wearing their rank, weren't being recognized as a non-commissioned officer. And I think we've changed that atmosphere to convince the Iraqi army officers that it's important to have a viable non-commissioned officer corps, and now everyone is wearing their NCO rank, those sergeants are wearing their NCO rank. We've seen them starting to take a leadership role, working with the soldiers, especially down at the squad and platoon level, and it's working well.

Q Now, is this being duplicated anywhere else?

LT. COL. MORSCHAUSER: We believe it -- yes. Now, I'd say it's sort of -- we're working in, you know, sort of -- not tunnel vision but we're working in a vacuum, but, you know, I don't have that great a visibility on stuff that's going outside of my 2nd Brigade, 10th Mountain's area. But from what I understand, this is starting to happen in other places. And a matter of fact, we were contacted by another battalion that's going to do the mission partnered with an Iraqi brigade similarly to how we are, and they just asked for our instruction material. And so they are starting a Warrior Leaders course, just as we've done it. And I've heard of other places around the country that this is happening also.

Q Thanks.

LT. COL. MORSCHAUSER: You're welcome.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

Grim.

Q (Off mike) -- ask a bit more about the commando courses you're talking about running. Could you talk a little bit about how the graduates are doing in terms of effectiveness in the field?

LT. COL. MORSCHAUSER: I -- all of it is positive. You know, I think they are -- I think the soldiers who are the jindi (sp) soldiers were a little surprised at how much emphasis we're placing on them. So subsequently, when they come out of these courses, their chests are sticking out, and they want to prove themselves. You know, they were selected, you know, to attend this course out of many soldiers, and they're out to prove themselves.

And what we're hearing -- well, not what we're hearing, what we're seeing, because we're out with them during the operations also, is that these guys are excelling in the field, want to show "this is what I learned either in the commando course or the warrior leaders course; this is what I learned, and this is how you do it; and you know, this is what a squad, dismounted patrol looks like; you know, we need to tweak this here, tweak that there." We see that happening quite a bit. So positive results, and we're seeing good work in the field.

Q Thank you.

LT. COL. MORSCHAUSER: You're welcome.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Charlie Quidnunc.

Q Yes, Colonel. This is Charlie Quidnunc with the Wizbang Podcast. My question deals with basically the same question I asked General Bergner, which is, if we don't have enough troops to keep the surge going with our troop rotation of 15 on, 12 off, the Iraqis are going to have to take over a lot of that. Can you give some examples of how they've -- your group has been able to train Iraqis to run their own operations? LT. COL. MORSCHAUSER: Sure. I can -- I could talk to my area, and I could talk to the Baghdad Eagle Brigade. They have accelerated -- in the year we've been here, they have accelerated in regard to their proficiency, their training level, et cetera, so much so, out of the five battalions that are in this brigade, four of them are considered in the lead -- TRA level 2 in the lead. They work their own area of operations partnered with a U.S. force, needing little assistance from that U.S. force.

So we're very excited about that. And like I said, we have one battalion to go, and we think that's going to be relatively soon, probably within the next six months.

But again, talking to the guys that we're working with, there are operations where they can go out -- they can plan, they can prepare, and they can go out and execute on their own and have no issues with it. And they do, whether it be security patrols, raids.

As a matter of fact, in our southern portion of our sector the other night, the Iraqis received a tip, quickly planned a raid in a pretty densely populated neighborhood in Lutifiyah, executed by themselves. We were watching from a UAV overhead and executed it perfectly, detained two and found in that same apartment a huge cache, to include large IEDs and crew-served weapons.

Q Is there any way we can get the video of that unarmed aerial vehicle that took the pictures?

COL. MORSCHAUSER: Sir, I don't know. Honest -- yeah, I don't know, sir. I will take a look and I'll have Captain Edge get back with whoever he needs to get back with. I don't know if that was recorded. If we did record it, then I'm not sure if we still have it.

Q It makes a great story. Okay.

MR. HOLT: Okay, yeah, we can follow up --

COL. MORSCHAUSER: But again, those type of things are really gratifying to see.

Q And they make great stories, too, for us.

COL. MORSCHAUSER: Quite frankly when we first got here, they could not conduct something like that. And it's been gratifying to see over this past year, these past 12 months, their development and the raise in confidence also in these Iraqi forces here, where we are working.

MR. HOLT: And Jarred.

Q Yes, sir. Thank you for taking the time to speak to us.

We see an awful lot, really a ton, and a flood of these very positive tactical improvement situations, killing terrorists, building up individual forces. But I think the American people want to really know strategically, how

are we going to actually win, whereby these army units that we're training are going to always maintain control over a direct civilian leadership? There's not going to be a coup; there's not going to be a civil war the day after we leave where half the Shi'a army fights the other half of the Shi'a army fights the Sunni army. What types of things do you see on the ground which gives you a sense of confidence that we're all pulling towards the same objective here?

COL. MORSCHAUSER: Well, first of all, you know I'm working down at the tactical level, not the strategic level. But I can tell you this.

You know, 90 percent of the foot brigade soldiers are Shi'a. You know, it's -- and they are working to try to get more Sunnis into this brigade -- got 50 percent split on officers. I will tell you, what we see overwhelmingly is that the Shi'a soldiers work extremely well with the Sunni local nationals.

You know, in my area in particular, you know, I have the Mahmudiyah, which is predominantly Shi'a. But the outlying agricultural areas, which makes up most of my land space -- out there in the farmlands, you're almost all Sunni, and the Shi'as work very well with them.

We have extended the Iraqi army since we've come here, their influence, from off the highway A corridor, which is that highway that runs north and south between Mahmudiyah, Lutifiyah, and we've pushed them east and west, put them in battle positions and checkpoints, et cetera, into these farmlands. And the interaction with the Sunni local nationals has been very positive. They are happy they are there. They pushed al Qaeda out of -- and other type of Sunni insurgent groups out of those areas, and we've seen the interaction at this level to be very good.

I will tell you that the brigade commander that I worked (with), Brigadier General Ali, nonsectarian, completely will not tolerate any sectarianism. So I think that bodes well for the future; the same with the battalion commanders. Are there any -- are there not any issues? Of course not. There are some. We have identified some officers and some soldiers that were acting in sectarian ways, and they have been dealt with by that chain of command. Most of them have been fired or have transferred out of the brigade, but again, that's not a large population. I don't know -- have the exact numbers, but it's basically a handful. I'd say a couple dozen at most.

And I will also say that they look very hard at that, and they take it very seriously if there are any allegations or any suspicion. And again, that's happening in this brigade. I'm not sure what's happening in other places.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Any follow-up questions?

Q Yeah, Colonel, Andrew Lubin again. Have you got a second?

LT. COL. MORSCHAUSER: Of course.

Q Yes, great. So you've got a -- one of these Shi'a pilgrimages coming up in the next day or two. Can you tell me what you -- (off mike) --

LT. COL. MORSCHAUSER: Yes, we're in the middle of it actually.

Q Pardon?

LT. COL. MORSCHAUSER: Yeah, we've started it today.

Q Okay. What happens with these? Do you have to basically line the roads or how do you run security, and what kind of -- how's -- how's it been going today? LT. COL. MORSCHAUSER: Yeah, it's -- you know, these are the times that we get very concerned. When you put a large population out on the roads, either driving or walking, we're very concerned, because, quite frankly, it can be an easy target for insurgents.

So, yes, we secure the road, obviously. The Iraqi army is basically every 200 to 300 meters or every 150 yards, 200 yards or so -- will have usually a vehicle with soldiers, and they have a line of sight with each other, so the road is secure.

Then you got to worry about, you know, east- and west- or the north- and south-running road. You've got to worry about mortars, you know, insurgent mortars that are going to target the roads, et cetera, snipers and those type of things.

So, you know, we work very hard putting counter mortar ambushes out. We're using our reconnaissance platforms to look for insurgent activity. We use attack aviation helicopters to look also. So it's a very active time for us, and we have a couple more days to get through. So far in our -- I think this is our fourth -- (audio break) -- pilgrimage -- we have been very fortunate in our AO to not have any major incidents whatsoever.

Q A quick -- a quick --

MR. HOLT: Sorry. Go ahead, Charlie.

Q No, I was just going to say, a quick follow-up to that, did the Iraqi population, do they -- obviously they can see our efforts to protect them. I mean, do you get a positive response back to them as far as information operations that they get to see -- well, the Americans protect them, the insurgents try to kill them?

LT. COL. MORSCHAUSER: Yeah, I'd say we've seen a change in that since we've arrived here. We are seeing a much, much greater -- or much a more positive reaction to our forces, both inside the cities and outside in the rural areas. We are -- our engagements are almost always positive now with the local nationals. They say they like when coalition forces are there.

The other thing that they'll you and they tell us all the time that we've done with the Iraqi army here -- they are much more confident in the Iraqi army's ability now than they were 12 months ago. So I think we're seeing some positive things in regards to the local population and their perception of the security and both the coalition -- but most importantly the Iraqi security forces.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Thank you very much. We're about out of time here. Any closing comments, sir?

LT. COL. MORSCHAUSER: No, sir, with the exception that I'll tell you that we're in our 12th month right now, and as all other active Army units, we're extended for an other three months. And I could tell you that in our task force here, I'm extremely proud of the dedication and focus of the soldiers here. These Americans that are working out here in south Baghdad are truly, truly American heroes, and I'm extremely proud to serve with them all.

But again, thank you for your time.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Thank you very much. Lieutenant Robert E. Morschauser is battalion commander, 2nd Battalion, 15th Field Artillery Regiment, 2nd Brigade, 10th Mountain Division. And appreciate your time, sir, and thank you for being with us. And we look forward to speaking with you again.

LT. COL. MORSCHAUSER: Sir, take care. Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Okay, thank you.

Q Hey, Colonel, thanks a lot. Appreciate the time today.

Q Colonel, thanks a lot.

END.